

# First record of Clay-colored Sparrow (*Spizella pallida* Swainson, 1832) (Aves: Emberizidae) in Costa Rica

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**ABSTRACT:** We present the first record of the Clay-colored Sparrow (*Spizella pallida*) in Costa Rica. An adult bird was recorded ca. 900 Km south of its common wintering range. This represents the first record of the species for the country and for southern Central America.

Since the publication of Stiles and Skutch (1989), the distribution and abundance of some resident (Sandoval 2004; Sandoval and Ellis 2006) and migratory species has changed in Costa Rica (Garrigues and Dean 2007). Most recently recorded species inhabit open areas, forest edge or secondary forest (Sánchez *et al.* 1998; Garrigues and Dean 2007), all of which habitats have recently increased in Costa Rica due to deforestation (Roxero-Bixby *et al.* 2002; Barrantes and Lobo 2005; Joyce 2006).

The Clay-colored Sparrow (*Spizella pallida* Swainson, 1832) breeds in central North America from West and South Canada across the Great Plains to the east of the Great Lakes, while in USA breeds from Wisconsin to New York (Beadle and Rising 2003). There it prefers grassy areas along with coniferous or deciduous trees and shrubs with nearby water (Knapton 1979). The species is fully migratory with wintering populations distributed across southern United States (New Mexico and Texas), to southern Mexico in the states of Veracruz, Oaxaca, and Chiapas (Howell and Webb 1995; Grant *et al.* 2012). South of Mexico the only records are from Guatemala (Howell and Webb 1995), and Belize (3 records; Jones 2003). Elsewhere, it is known from Cuba where it is considered a rare winter migrant (Garrido and Kirkconnell 2000.). Here we report the first record of the Clay-colored Sparrow for southern Central America, in Costa Rica.

On 13 January 2013, at the Botanical Gardens of Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza, Turrialba, Cartago prov., Costa Rica (09°54'02"N, 83°40'06"W, and 600m), S.A. observed and photographed an adult Clay-colored Sparrow (Figure 1). After the first observation, the presumably same individual was observed repeatedly by the authors up to 27 January 2013 always in the same area, which suggests that the individual has site fidelity. The habitat where the individual was observed is a mixture of grasses, bushes and isolated trees, bordered by secondary forest and orchards. Typically the bird forages in open grassy areas, but seeks cover in the denser shrubby area. Other seed-eating species are commonly observed in the area and usually forage in mixed-flocks,

such as Variable Seedeater (*Sporophila americana*), Blue-black Grassquit (*Volatinia jacarina*) and Yellow-faced Grassquit (*Tiaris olivaceus*). On the other hand, the Clay-colored Sparrow was always observed foraging solitarily; though in one occasion it aggressively displaced a female Variable Seedeater.

This is the first record for Costa Rica and the southernmost record of the species. Our observation is ca. 900 km south from previously known records.

Is hard to speculate the reasons for the arrival of the Clay-colored Sparrow to Costa Rica. However in the last years in Costa Rica other vagrant sparrows that normally do not overwinter in the country have been observed (Huertas Villalobos and Sandoval 2012; Sandoval and Sánchez 2013). Some of these sparrows include Chipping (*Spizella passerina*) and Lincoln's Sparrow (*Melospiza lincolni*), and in each case they were single individuals (Sandoval *et al.* 2010.) Most observations of North American vagrants involve single individuals, which have presumably overshot their normal winter range, or reflect deteriorating conditions in wintering habitats further north.



**FIGURE 1.** Clay-colored Sparrow (*Spizella pallida*) observed at Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza Botanical Garden, Turrialba, Cartago province, on 23 January 2013. (Julio E. Sánchez).

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